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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly summarizes the findings of a recent survey that investigated the attitudes of American Catholics toward Catholic schools and toward the Catholic church as a whole, then discusses the implications of the survey findings for the future of Catholic schools in the United States. The data suggest that the decline in mass attendance and Catholic school enrollment over the past decade is largely a result of changing attitudes toward papal authority in general and the ban on birth control in particular. The church hierarchy has contributed to this decline, the author argues, by preventing lay participation in church decision-making and by basing policy decisions on inaccurate stereotypes of American Catholics. The author asserts that many of the problems now facing American Catholic schools could be effectively attacked through implementation of an opinion research program that would enable the church hierarchy to be more responsibe to the needs and attitudes of its members. (JG)

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CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN THE FUTURE: REFLECTIONS ON NORC II

by

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CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN THE FUTURE: REFLECTIONS ON NORC II

William C. McCready

I have been asked here this morning to offer my reflections on the future of Catholic education in our country based on the research we have done at the National Opinions Research Center (NORC). I plan to summarize very briefly the findings of that research and then to address the question of what it means to you as Catholic educators and to all of us who are members of the church. (For those who would like to peruse the detailed report of our findings, Mr. Andrews at the Sheed & Ward booth has plenty of copies he is more than ready to sell.)

The relationship between research and policy is perhaps best depicted by two cartoons I keep on my office wall. The first shows a circus trainer sitting dejectedly looking at a large, dumb elephant who has just fallen off a ball on which he was standing. The trainer says, "It seems some days like I make a little progress, then other days it seems like I'm not getting anywhere at all." Institutions, like elephants, are very hard to train.

The second cartoon shows a bunch of animated numbers standing around on a stage much like this one and an announcer is saying, "Tonight we are going to let the statistics speak for themselves." It might be interesting if statistics could speak for themselves but they cannot. Data require interpretation before they become useful findings which can be applied to decision-making. My purpose this morning is two-fold: to convert data to findings about

the attitudes of Catholics, and to make recommendations about future educational policies. In other words, I am going to speak for the statistics and suggest some ways to train the elephant.

Times have changed for the church in our country, and a great deal of the change has happened during the past decade. In 1963, we were nearing the end of an era of institutional vitality which had steadily increased since the early part of the century. More than 70 per cent of the Catholics attended mass at least every week, 44 per cent of our school children were in Catholic schools, and more than 50 per cent of the faithful agreed with the official ban on birth control. (Seventy-four per cent of those with more than 10 years of Catholic education agreed with the ban.)

Little more than a decade later we find that barely 50 per cent of the faithful attend weekly mass (a third of them go once a year or less), only 29 per cent of our school children attend parochial schools, and only 13 per cent agree with the ban on birth control. During the same period, the church lost an estimated 1.8 billion dollars in potential revenue. Some of our critics have said we spoke too strongly about the gloomy side of these findings. I do not think so. This has been a disastrous collapse of institutional support in a very short time. If the church were a human being, we would have rushed it to intensive care with all possible haste!

One bright spot in this picture, besides increased communion reception, is the perfomance of the Catholic schools. Popular support for them remains high, and they are more important for the church than they were a decade ago. They have not turned the tide of decline, but they have certainly kept it from engulfing the church. Catholic education deters losses where they are likely to be the greatest, among the young and among men. We know from other research that men are critical in transmitting religious values to their

children, and if the Catholic family is to continue to be the place where religious awareness is nurtured, we are going to need all the religious young men we can get.

Our research allowed us to explain the decline in the church that occurred during the past decade better than most such efforts do. The explanation came as a surprise to us, and, judging from the reactions of those in the official ranks, it was a shock to many others. We had expected that the changes made during the Vatican Council would account for much of the decline; but there was no evidence that this in fact had happened. After exploring other possible explanations, we looked at the effects of the encyclical on birth control together with people's attitudes toward papal authority and discovered that we had found our explanation.

The changing attitudes toward the ban on birth control and toward papal authority explain most of the declines observed in the decade. These declines include the lower levels of mass attendance (which directly affect the parish subsidies for parochial schools). They include the fall-off in vocations, which make the drop in the Dow Jones during our latest recession pale by comparison. They include the declining levels of participation in Catholic activities that has plagued most diocesan programs in recent years. And finally, the loss of almost one billion dollars in potential contributions can be explained by people's attitudes toward the church's teaching on sexual ethics. It is not my place to make theological or ethical policy, but as an observer of the American Catholic Church over the past decade, I can say that it was one expensive papal pronouncement.

Some commentators have asked how we can prove that the encyclical "caused" the declines in the church. As a matter of fact, in our report we

carefully steered away from using the word "cause" because of the confusing metaphysical and epistomological ambiguities which surround it. However, social science is not simply concerned with linkages between variables but with the explanation of social phenomena. If the term "causal models" makes some people unhappy, we will gladly use "explanatory models" instead. We have been interested in explaining the decline of American Catholicism over the past decade, and we think we have done it.

An old research adage is that if a proposition cannot be falsified then neither can it be verified. Many of the alternative explanations we have heard recently make fine cocktail chatter, but they won't hold water as scientific propositions because they can neither be falsified nor verified. How can you prove or disporve such explanations as "the collapse of family life," "the loss of respect for authority," or "post-conciliar turbulence" (whatever that may be)? We proposed several explanations which could be verified or falsified, and the only one that was verified by the data was the birth control-papal authority explanation. We think we have proven our explanation beyond a reasonable doubt and we do not think anyone is likely to come up with evidence which will significantly change our findings. Does our proof have certainty? No, not in the way in which contemporary physicists and mathematicians use the word. But if we think in terms of converging probabilities and John Henry Newman's "illative sense," then we have simple certainty, the kind you had this morning when you knew this talk would take place soon after you arrived, the kind of certainty that in the ordinary affairs of life is quite sufficient to support decisions and actions.

So much for the basic findings of the report. If these data are to have an impact on the future educational policies of the church, they must somehow be brought into the sequestered policy-making processes which function so mysteriously in the back rooms of the ecclesiastical establishment. As Catholic educators and as church members, you have a considerable vested interest in decisions which affect the future educational effort of the church; yet you do not really have very much to say about specific decisions with regard to the expansion and contraction of the church's educational mission. And, unfortunately, the Catholic laity who support that mission has even less to say about educational policies than you do.

There's a story about the man who was asked who made the decisions in his house. "My wife makes all the little decisions, like where we will live, what school the kids will attend, and who our friends will be," he said. "I make the big ones, like what shall we do about inflation, our relations with Russia, etc." The laity seldom have anything to say about either the big or the little decisions because no one is listening to them.

Although there is not very much known about the actual decision processes of the church, one suspects that much of it is dependent upon several key stereotypes of the Catholic population in the minds of the decision-makers. Perhaps our recent information can shed some light on these stereotypes as to how closely they match reality.

Stereotype 1: Most Catholics are blue-collar workers and lower middle class socioeconomically. The facts of the matter are that Catholics are quite high in terms of income and educational levels. Some of the specific ethnic groups among the Catholic population have moved into the professional and managerial occupations in a dramatic fashion.

Stereotype 2: Catholic ethnics are conservative socially and politically. This too is false. Catholic ethnics are liberal or progressive on most social issues.

Stereotype 3: Catholic priests are not happy in their vocations, and it is the best among them who leave the priesthood. On the contrary, most priests are happy in their vocations. Those who leave do so because they do not enjoy doing the kind of work priests do.

Stereotype 4.: The encyclical Humanae Vitae caused great moral anguish, and the Vatican Council turned people away from the church because of liturgical changes. Nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, the Council tended to counter some of the negative forces from the encyclical, which turned out to be an institutional depressant.

Stereotype 5: Popular support among Catholics for the continuation of the Catholic school system is declining. There is no evidence for this myth; in fact, the opposite is true, with nearly 90 per cent of the Catholics expressing support for the schools in 1974.

Stereotype 6: CCD programs are adequate replacements for the religious component of Catholic education. CCD appears to be a little better than no religious education at all, but it is nowhere near as effective as ten or more years of parochial schooling in inculcating religious values.

All of these stereotypes are wrong, according to recently collected opinion data, yet they have had a powerful impact on formulation of Catholic educational policies over the past decade. Decisions were and continue to be made in the absence of information about the nature of the marketplace. There is no ongoing research effort on the part of the church in this

country, no monitoring of Catholic opinion with regard to the salient issues of the day, no attempt to engage in the kind of listening that leadership needs to do to keep in touch with the people. With the exception of FDLC funding to analyze the changing attitudes toward the liturgy, there has not been one penny of church money put into either of the studies we are discussing this morning. Contrary to popular opinion, it would not be difficult for the church leaders to fund such research. If they were to allocate $20 per each Catholic school in the country, for example, we could do an annual attitude survey of the Catholic population and monitor such things as changing patterns of mass attendance, financial contributions, and support for the Catholic educational system. Twenty dollars per school! The only reason they refuse to make this significant expenditure is that our leaders see no reason why they should listen to us at all. They have not and do not consult us on decisions which affect our personal lives, the lives of our children, and our neighborhoods; and there is no sign that they are about to begin now.

If the information which we have presented in Catholic Schools in a Declining Church had been available during this decade, things might have been done differently. For example, if decision-makers had known the extent to which a Catholic education enabled people to cope with transitions and remain loyal to the church, perhaps they would have renewed their commitment to it rather than put a moratorium on expansion and development. If the church had known that fathers play the most influential role in the religious socialization of their children and that Catholic education successfully fosters religious values in young men, perhaps more energy would have been

put into finding innovative and creative solutions to the problems of financing Catholic schools. If our leaders had had data about the willingness and ability of people to increase their support for the schools, perhaps we would have developed alternatives to CCD. If our leaders had done some extensive evaluation of these types of programs, if the myth that instruction was as effective as Catholic education had been faced with empirical facts, perhaps the church could have channeled its resources more effectively, less wastefully. If more attention had been paid to the "listening church" by the "teaching church," perhaps the church could have made a more creative contribution to our understanding of human intimacy.

As it has turned out, the recent decade has seen our leadership waver and wobble in their commitment to the Catholic schools, which are a powerful resource for the future; they remain rigidly steadfast in support of a non-infallible pronouncement about the nature of human intimacy that has proved to have disastrous consequences for the institutional life of the church. Yes, it could have been a better decade!

There is a story currently making the rounds about the two bishops who meet at the O'Hare Hilton on their way to separate meetings. One says, "I have some good news and some bad news for you." The other says, "Well, let's have the good news first."

"There is a report that Christ has actually returned to earth."

"Well, that's great, " says Bishop Number Two. "Now the church can really get rolling again just like the old days."

"Not so hasty there, friend," says Bishop One. "The bad news is that he's been spotted in Salt Lake City."

Now I do not for a minute believe that we have been abandoned by the Almighty, although He may have had good reason to do so. A sensible God would have dropped us long ago; only one who is a little crazy would stand by some of the foolish things we have done. However, it is not necessary to abandon all our powers of sense and reason just because we know He won't deny us His love. There are steps we can take to correct some of the mistakes of the past. I would suggest as a beginning four interrelated policy recommendations.

First, the hierarchy ought to withdraw from operational involvement with the parochial school systems around the country. The financial and educational decision-making ought to be in the hands of lay and religious representatives who are in touch with local and community-wide interests. Parish education and finance boards ought to determine local parish educational policies, and those parishes which require outside subsidies in order to maintain their schools ought to be able to deal with a representative financial assistance board at the diocesan level rather than with one bishop who may or may not know anything about the local situation. (This would also, it seems to me, take a great load off the shoulders of certain members of the hierarchy.)

The parochial schools are viewed positively by most Catholics, and they are viewed as a resource for the entire Catholic community, not just for those who attend them. Most parish schools do not function via full-cost tuition but are in part subsidized by either the parish or the diocese. They are "our" schools in a very real sense of the word. They reflect "our" values and are maintained with "our" dollars. We support them through a variety of mechanisms, such as direct tuition payments, Sunday collections,

alumni drives, and a variety of fundraising events. Yet when costs rise and inflation hits, we are seldom asked our opinions. We are seldom asked if we will increase our support of the schools or if there are other sources of support available. No, "our" schools are closed by decision of a higher authority who, in effect, says that they were never "our" schools at all; they have always been "his" schools, and he will do what he thinks is best for all of us even if it means eventually abandoning a commitment to parochial schools altogether. For the lack of adequate information and innovation on the part of our leaders we could lose the one resource that has been helpful to the church during a time of transition and decline, our parochial schools. This style of decision-making is flawed and must not continue! It is deceitful to ask people to devote their time and money to the support of Catholic schools and to leave them out of the decision-making process when it comes to determining their continued existence. To paraphrase a familiar commercial, "It's not nice to fool the people of God!"

The second recommendation is that there be a total moratorium on official pronouncements about the do's and the don'ts of human sexuality until the "teaching church" has a long, hard dialogue with the "learning church." The church's teaching on sexual ethics not only ignores the complexities of sexuality in the contemporary era, it also ignores much of the richness of our own traditional wisdom about intimate relationships. Is it possible that a church possessed of that marvelously rich sexual symbol we have just seen this Easter, the plunging of the lighted paschal candle into the font of holy water, can only tell its people what <u>not</u> to do in their bedrooms? The transformation of that pagan fertility rite by the

Christian revelation of hope and resurrection through God's love for each of us is one of the cultural bombshells in human history. Sexuality was not denied in the process but it was transformed. We are totally loved and therefore we can love others; yet official church teaching has become mired in a controversy of mechanics and metaphysics.

The assumption was made that Catholic values about sexuality were unidimensional. Artificial contraception was seen as the beginning of a chain of dominoes; if it fell, all the others would follow suit. Soon there would be no respect for life or for the sacred quality of human relationships left among Catholics. What an underestimation of the sensibilities of so-called ordinary Catholic lay people! Actually, American Catholics have proven themselves far more astute and sophisticated than their leaders give them credit for being. There is no indication that the approval of artificial contraception has heralded a lowering of the respect for life or the sanctity of sexuality on the part of Catholics. Less than 8 per cent of Catholics approve of abortion when it comes to their own personal moral decision, and they have made clear distinctions and judgments among different circumstances under which they feel abortion ought to be legalized within our pluralistic constitutional democracy. There is a solid coalition of Catholics and Protestants who are opposed to the legalization of abortion on demand after the first trimester; but many in the church are still acting as if it is a unique Catholic issue in our society.

Most American Catholics have shown themselves able to live within a pluralistic society that contains many different persuasions about the values to be honored without abandoning their own values in the process.

Most of us mature when we admit that we have made a mistake and have taken steps to correct it. Why can we not assume that the church too would grow and mature if it could admit that the rigid prohibition against artifical contraception was an honest mistake? This would at least open the door to a much richer interpretation of human sexuality, one which our theology and out tradition certainly say is possible.

The third recommendation is that we explore the whole range of financial support for parochial education. Subsequent to this we should explore alternate ways of financing the Catholic schools in specific situations. One commentator recently said that it was debatable whether or not Catholics would support the capital expenditures needed to underwrite school expansion to the tune of $50,000 per classroom. I could not agree more. It is very debatable. But why waste time debating it? Let's ask people and find out how much they are willing to give and under what circumstances they would be willing to give it. Our estimates of how much more money people are willing to contribute to the church in order to keep a parochial school open total almost 2 billion dollars. Even if the true amount were only half of that, it would mean that we could build 500 new twenty-room schools, pay for their operating costs, cut contributed services by nearly half, and still have some left for a rainy day.

Speaking of estimates, by the way, some people always ask, "How good are your estimates of such things, given that you only interviewed 925 people?" The official NCEA report for 1973-1974 said that approximately 794 million dollars had been paid in tuition for that year for parochial schools. Our estimate for the same year, based on our sample of 925 respondents, was 805 million, just about 1 per cent off.

Schools in inner-city neighborhoods are providing viable alternatives to public education for a predominantly black, non-Catholic clientele. However, these schools do not have the resources of traditional parishes in many cases and frequently must depend on diocesan subsidies. When times are hard these subsidies are often terminated, which brings local parochial forces and diocesan forces into direct conflict. A better approach is to remove the hierarchy from the subsidy business and create a diocesan school finance board to undertake the creation and management of a subsidy program that would dovetail with parishes and help them find ways of becoming self-supporting while still on subsidy. Never again should one man, no matter how much clout he has or thinks he has in Rome, be able to unilaterally close down schools which are serving our black and Latin brothers and sisters on the grounds that some of these brothers and sisters don't happen to be Catholic.

Such a school finance board could also explore ways of enabling those Catholics who see the schools as an integral part of their commitment to the church to help inner-city schools to donate time and money. Endowment funds for scholarships and subsidies could be designed to go hand in hand with tuition increases at the local level. Parochial schools have served people well and should continue to do so with creative management. It is tragic to hear stories, such as I did recently, about the school in the East that closed its doors while still operating at full capacity and charging only $150 tuition per student.

Catholic education is one of the best bargains in the country and people don't know it. If the books were opened and the real facts of the situation made clear, most people would be more than willing to increase their gifts to the church to help out. However, that would mean that ultimate control of the schools would pass from the dioceses to the people who pay for them, and that would mean that bishops would have to return to being spiritual leaders and give up being fiscal administrators. Come to think of it, that's not a bad trade. We need our top-level spiritual leaders to be just that: people who challenge us and our ideals and help us move forward.

Ultimately, the financial pinch for parochial education is not the result of people being unwilling to pay for Catholic schools. We built this system when people were not nearly as wealthy as they are today. Our standard of living has risen considerably since the early part of this century. Our people have color televisions, take vacations, and enjoy the good life to a greater degree than ever before. They also have indicated that they are willing to increase their financial support for the parochial schools.

The financial crunch has come because of hesitant leadership, a leadership that has done nothing to investigate the facts of the situation and which appears ready to ignore facts when they are uncovered. People need to be encouraged to support the church and the schools; they need to be told what a bargain they are getting for their educational dollar; they need to face the fact that if they were dropping a twenty on the collection plate 20 years ago, they should be making that two twenties today just to stay even with inflation. The way the system is currently organized, our

symbolic leaders are responsible for managing the money we contribute to the church and no one is really responsible for challenging and motivating our giving habits. It ought to be turned around: church leadership should motivate and challenge us and we should be doing the managing. However, in order for our leaders to do that job properly, they would have to know something about us as we really are and stop dealing with us according to outdated and erroneous stereotypes. And this brings me to my last recommendation.

(Saving the plug for last) I would suggest that the church embark upon a research and development program that would bring it to parity with at least most large American corporations. If the church in this country has been developing its own research capacity during the past decade, its leaders would not have had to suffer the works of Greely, McCready , and McCourt but would have up-to-date information of such things as the devotional practices and doctrinal beliefs of the faithful, the efficacy of Catholic education, the level of popular support for parochial schools, the reaction to decisions, and potential sources of financial contributions right at their fingertips. The church would have a well-trained research staff to analyze data and contribute to policy discussions. All this could be possible for about $20 per school. (Diocesan funding of such research would range from about $9500 for Chicago to about $20 for Anchorage.)

The necessity for developing and maintaining a staff of trained researchers is paramount, because they enable agencies to utilize data and information rather than be surprised by it. Such a staff could not be created by fiat, however; it must be nurtured and cultivated and allowed to make mistakes like any growing thing. The real obstacle to a serious

research effort on the part of the church is not, in the final analysis, money, talent, or difficult techniques; rather it is the reluctance of the hierarchy to abandon the myths by which they have ruled the church for so long. To listen to the people in a systematic way, which is what such research actually is, can be a very threatening venture, especially when one has grown to depend on stereotypes rather than information.

People who invest resources in research may find out some unpleasant news. It will be difficult to pretend that everything is rosy or that the observed declines are really just part of the larger social scene and not the result of any specific policies or actions when people's attitudes and behaviors are tabulated and systematically analyzed. The real stake in this last recommendation is the extent to which the teaching church desires to hear the voices of the listening church--especially when they are dissenting voices. To admit hearing the dissenting opinions is the first step on the road to considering it at the policy table, and that can be a very long step indeed. In the immortal words of Pius XI, which some of our leaders seem to have forgotten, "The Catholic Church has nothing to fear from the truth."

Summary

One last story. There was once a young Irish girl who applied for admission to the most strict of all the cloistered orders. This order was so strict that they were allowed to speak only two words once every two years, and those only to Mother Superior. The girl was accepted, and after her first two years were up she approached Mother Superior at the appropriate time and said, "Bed hard." Mother Superior nodded. Another two years went by

and again it was time to speak. The postulant approached Mother Superior and said, "Food cold." Mother Superior nodded. Now another two years went by and the young sister approached her superior and said, "I quit!" Mother Superior looked up and said, "Well it's about time. All you've done for six years is complain!"

I sincerely hope that our research is not dismissed as complaining or even troublemaking. Rather, opinion research of this kind should be seen as an opportunity to find out what people "out there" are thinking. One of the most exciting moments in my business is when you first find out how people answered the questions you designed. It's like a continuous surprise, and I never tire of it. In one way, it is amazing that things aren't worse than they are within the Catholic population given the stresses and strains that beset it. In our report we noted a "bottoming out" effect in both the declines in church attendance and in school enrollment. Perhaps it is the light at the end of the tunnel. Then perhaps it is only a freight train coming the other way. We need to find out!

In a previous research project we developed an indicator of hopefulness, which was derived from a series of responses to life-crisis situations in which people were asked to conisder their reaction to impending death. Hope is that perspective toward tragedy which does not deny the evil of the situation but at the same time expresses confidence that the forces of goodness are strong enough to overcome the evil and the suffering. Catholic schools play an important role in developing hopeful adults who can weather changes and live with ambiguities. Hope also leads to racial tolerance, increased Catholic activism, and support for vocations. A cadre of hopeful and tolerant people

are a tremendous advantage to an institution, such as the church, that is going through crises of confidence and morale. These people will be most important as future leaders in the midst of religious and social changes, and you can be damn proud of them.

Our schools are neither relics that need to be preserved nor anomalies whose purpose needs to be questioned. They are precious resources that exist now and that need to be supported to the extent of all our powers. We can challenge Catholic schools and give them the opportunity to become vibrant alternatives to public education without insisting that they become winner-take-all competitors. Experiment and innovation in our schools has been a phenomenon which draws more and more public notice. Value-oriented education is "in," and parochial schools have a head start on the rest. It seems that all too often Catholics drop something just as the rest of society is beginning to sense its worth (witness religious garb, incense, and ritual). This time let us hang on to our schools and what we know is good about them. Let no one take them from us. In the year 2000, let us look back upon this time and congratulate ourselves for having the foresight to nurture one of the church's most durable resources, our parochial school system.